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TO : Department of State

INFO : CINCPAC
DANANG
HUE

FROM : AmEmbassy SAIGON

DATE: August 31, 1966

SUBJECT : CA Elections: Close Race in Binh Duong

REF :

Four almost equally-matched candidates will fight it out for Binh Duong province's two seats in the Constituent Assembly. After a month of back-room politicking, a woman, an ARVN major, a millionaire and a judge are the front-runners as six slates begin their appeal to the electorate.

Slightly more than seventy-five thousand voters, including twelve thousand soldiers and their dependents, are registered in this rich but Viet Cong-harassed province. Its northern reaches are part of the Communist redoubt of Zone D; thus some 110,000 of the province's estimated 250,000 inhabitants will go unrepresented. Four-fifths of the voters live in Lai Thieu and Chau Thanh districts, fertile and relatively secure garden exurbs of Saigon, an hour's drive north of the capital. North of the province seat, Phu Cuong, or to the west of it, across the Saigon river, the picture changes radically. There, in a land of lush, narrow valleys and rubber plantations, the GVN controls only the district towns.

With registration 35% above the May, 1965 total, it appears that the pacification program has made some progress in the last year. The Viet Cong can hardly be counted out, however; anti-election propaganda is reported daily, and it is apparent that the Communists have considerable means with which to disrupt the election in this province.

The ARVN 5th Division, which has its headquarters a short distance outside the province capital, is a potent force in Binh Duong politics. The division's G-5, Major TRAN VAN THANH, is a candidate, assuredly at the prompting of his commanding officer, Brigadier General Pham quoc Thuan. No

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foul play such as the 5th Division engineered in neighboring Binh Long province (see Embassy's A-90) is apparent in Binh Duong, however, and Thanh's chances are therefore good but not certain.

Major Thanh, for twenty years a career soldier, has been with the 5th Division in Binh Duong since 1964. He is teamed with ARVN Captain TRAN VAN THEM. They can count on the vast majority of the eight thousand votes controlled by the Division but are not likely to win many of the other four thousand military votes. These votes are those of the Popular Forces, which are responsive not to the Division but to the Province Chief, Lt. Col. Ly tong Ba, who is invariably at odds with General Thuan.

Thanh's best hope for broadening his base of support lies in Binh Duong's 15,000 Catholics, who like Thanh are for the most part refugee Northerners. [redacted] articulate priest who from his warehouse supervises Catholic relief work in six provinces, strongly endorsed the major. Although Major Thanh says that he also hopes for labor backing his prospects appear dim for other than Catholic and 5th Division support, for the Division's rapport with the provincial population is notoriously poor.

In addition to Major Thanh, Mrs. DUONG THI HIEM, NGUYEN DINH QUAT and PHAM DINH HUNG have good prospects of winning a seat.

Mrs. Hiem, an ardent feminist, must overcome a nationwide prejudice against the idea of granting women a leading role in politics. She may prove equal to the task. Although Binh Duong sophisticates scoff at the pretensions of this energetic forty-six year old widow, they respect the strong grass-roots backing that she has built up in many years of social work in her native province. Mrs. Hiem's opponents say that she is woefully uneducated, and [redacted] says it would be "catastrophic" if she were elected, but several American observers report that she has been by far the most effective member of the Province Council. Her running mate is Nguyen van So, a village chief.

Millionaire industrialist and plantation owner Quat is widely suspected of intending to "buy his election". This forty-nine year old Catholic native of Central Viet-Nam revealed [redacted] a sort of New Frontier image, denouncing the Ky regime for corruption and isolation from the people. It was not altogether clear exactly what he desired; at one point he criticized the government as "lacking sovereignty" and at another point took the United States to task for its "inability to prevent abuses" of its assistance. The people, Quat declared, are now justified if they choose to follow the Viet Cong.

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Quat was one of Ngo Dinh Diem's clay-pigeon opponents for the Presidency in 1961, when, he says, he polled 89,000 votes. He now introduces himself as Chairman of the Khoi Dan-Chu Cap-Tien (Radical Democratic Bloc), which is one of the nation's myriad political parties of no importance.

Quat hopes for, and may receive, a part of the province's Catholic vote. His opponents believe he has a strong base in the labor force at his two large rubber plantations; it is not clear however, how many voters this would be. Quat's name is more familiar to the electorate than any but Mrs. Hiem's. Thus it seems that he cannot be ruled out of contention.

The fourth major candidate is Judge Hung, whom most sources acknowledge to be the most "qualified" of the candidates. This is indicative of a wide-spread feeling among politically-sophisticated Vietnamese that members of the Constituent Assembly ought to be trained in the law or, at the least, college-educated. How strongly the masses share this view remains to be seen.

Hung, who sits on the Saigon bench is a physically unimpressive man who seems to be having second thoughts on the matter of running for election. His younger brother, a schoolteacher, is his running mate. Although Hung owns a house in Saigon and two in Binh Duong, his native province, he professes to be impoverished. His political beliefs are in the mainstream, although with a slight authoritarian bias. Hung is a Confucianist. He appears convinced that his opponents, particularly Quat and Thanh, are planning skullduggery and asked the reporting officer to arrange for foreign reporters to visit Binh Duong often during the campaign "to keep the election honest".

His prestige as a judge, his long-time residence in Binh Duong and his many contacts in the province administration are Hung's greatest assets. Hung appears to be so handicapped by his lack of self-assurance and his fears of the Viet Cong that he will probably not wage a vigorous campaign and will thus lose his early advantage.

Of special interest in the Binh Duong race is the appearance of a slate which appears to seek support as "Buddhist candidates". TRINH VAN THANH and LE PHAT TRIEN are registered under the Buddhist "White Lotus"

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symbol. They are young schoolteachers of Southern origin at the province's Buddhist high school. This school, an Embassy officer was told, was the center of the "Struggle Movement" in Binh Duong. The faculty of the school is said to have incited the students to demonstrate against the government on several occasions. The 'struggle" in Binh Duong did not amount to much, however; all attempted demonstrations were nipped in the bud by the Province Chief. The reporting officer was unable to uncover any information positively linking Buddhist candidates Thanh and Trien themselves to the "struggle"; presumably they are influenced by but not implicated in the "struggle movement". Saigon's political perturbations cause hardly a ripple in Binh Duong, so this list is not likely to win more than a handful of votes.

The remaining ticket is that of CAO DINH HUE, owner of a typing school and sometime contractor for the 5th Division, and Lt. Col. NGUYEN VAN Y, a military police commander. As a major, Y was stationed in Binh Duong with the 5th Division. Both individuals are now residents of neighboring Bien Hoa province and do not appear to enjoy any strong support in Binh Duong.

In summary, if the elections in Binh Duong take place without irregularities, ARVN Major Tran van Thanh and feminist Mrs. Duong thi Hiem appear to have a slight edge over both Judge Pham Dinh Hung and Nguyen Dinh Quat.

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